

IRS Oversight Board Public Forum

February 28, 2012

Statement of the Honorable Patricia A. Jonas, Executive Director of the Office of Appellate Operations and Deputy Chair of the Appeals Council, Social Security Administration

Panel 3: Human Capital Management Challenges: Fostering Employee Mentoring, Engagement, and Development in a Limited Budget Environment

I appreciate the invitation to join in a discussion of the critical human capital management issues that face all federal agencies. In a limited budget environment, we all seek to recruit, develop and retain highly qualified individuals who can help us meet our mission objectives and who will ultimately lead our organizations. So while my experiences are related to how these issues are being addressed at the Social Security Administration (SSA), I am certain that you will recognize themes that are applicable to the IRS.

A quick description of my component at SSA will put my comments into context. I lead an organization of about 1,200 people. This includes about 70 Administrative Appeals Judges, 55 Appeals Officers, several hundred attorney analysts, several hundred non-attorney paralegal analysts and other support staff. We are responsible for the last step of SSA's administrative appeals process. The majority of our work involves disability appeals. Individuals who are dissatisfied with our decisions can then proceed to federal court. As the last step in the Agency's appeals process we were also the last step to become automated. My organization was also the subject of two major tests during the late 1990's and mid 2000's to determine whether to retain, modify or eliminate this final step in the appeals process. Since there was no clear resolution for

many years, there was minimal staff replacement, no evolution of business processes and little incentive for innovation. The issues were resolved in 2009 and the Commissioner of SSA invested in additional staff, facilities and automation for my component. However, to paraphrase a statement from GAO, the Commissioner challenged us to quickly transform ourselves “to plan strategically, react expeditiously, and focus on achieving results.”¹

We needed to hire additional analysts to process a growing caseload. New analysts had traditionally been selected from experienced staff within SSA. While these employees required training on the disability adjudication process, they were already familiar with SSA systems, business processes and many of the non-disability technical requirements of eligibility. Nevertheless, the learning curve for these new analysts to become proficient in their new jobs was 18 months. There were two problems with the traditional model – we were unable to fill the number of vacancies from internal selections and the learning curve was too long to help meet our mission of dealing with a rapid increase of pending cases.

The First Challenge: We had to identify a recruitment strategy to achieve an effective and diverse pool of qualified applicants and establish an effective training and mentoring program that would substantially reduce the new employee learning curve. The downturn in the economy made it possible for us to fill these employee vacancies with attorneys who had academic skills that would be beneficial to assist us in delivering our mission. With the assistance of our colleagues in SSA, we developed recruitment relationships with the top rated law schools, including historically Black Law Schools and Bar Associations that represented the interests of

¹ GAO High Risk and Other Major Government Challenges: Governmental Management Challenges - Human Capital Management <http://www.gao.gov/highrisk/challenges/human-capital-management.php#needs>

minority attorneys and law students. We eventually hired several hundred law clerks and attorneys who were hired as attorney analysts.

While this group came to us with demonstrated academic skills, none had any of the skills or SSA experience that were assumed when we traditionally trained new employees. We had to develop a new training and mentoring program that would meet their needs and the Agency's need to reduce the length of time it took to become productive. I was invited to join you in this discussion today because SSA won the 2011 W. Edwards Deming Award which is presented annually to a federal government organization in recognition of a workforce development and training initiative that has measurably improved the organization's performance. We created a state-of-the-art training course focused on curriculum that revolutionized how employees are taught new skills, with the desired goal of achieving a high rate of efficiency and accuracy and defining good public service. At its core the program essentially eliminated lectures and relied heavily upon repeated practical demonstration and participation. Perhaps most importantly, we developed employee feedback loops that guided us in making changes to the delivery and content of the training. We continue to monitor employee productivity and quality for each training class to help evaluate the effectiveness of the changes. When we received the Deming Award in 2011, the learning curve for the new employees was reduced from 18 months to 8 months because of this initiative. And for the last three training classes, the learning curve has dropped to 5 months.

The Ongoing Challenge: Our ongoing challenge is not only to retain these new employees but also to effectively lead and develop them. Our managers were used to supervising experienced SSA employees who were typically at the end of their careers – not at the beginning. They were used to managing paralegal analysts and not attorney analysts. There were obvious generational

challenges for the managers. Our new employees were mentored by experienced staff who were sometimes intimidated by the legal background of their new colleagues as well as their comfort level with technology and instant communication.

We have addressed some of these challenges using both traditional and non-traditional methods. Our new employees tell us that they want to know what is happening in our organization. They also want to know how they can move forward in their careers. Using a traditional form of communication, I issue a newsletter every two weeks that includes information related to improving work processes, demonstrates our progress towards goals and other reminders. Each issue also contains a staff profile and career path studies that provide examples for new staff of how they can advance in their career.² The most recent edition of this newsletter also addresses mentoring and is one of a two- part series that encourages experienced staff to volunteer as a mentor. A less traditional approach to facilitate mentoring was a recent “MENTworking” (a/k/a speed mentoring) event in January 2012 that helped to advertise National Mentoring Month.³

SSA attributes its success in being one of the top ten places to work⁴ to:

- Effective Leadership,
- Developing and retaining a highly skilled and innovative workforce, which reflects the American public,
- Training employees and giving them the tools they need to work at their highest potential, and
- Increasing employees’ opportunities for advancement.

² See attachment – OAO Executive Director’s Broadcast, Vol. 3, Issue 3 (2/3/2012)

³ See attachment – 1/23/2012 e-mail

⁴ The Partnership for Public Service – SSA ranked # 6 in list of large agencies in 2011

Developing, training, and retaining employees will be an ongoing challenge, especially in times of limited budgets. I've described a specific challenge that my component needed to address in the past few years in which we were able to effectively recruit, train and develop employees. We have generally been successful in retaining our employees within SSA. Both our new and experienced employees tell us that they appreciate the opportunity to work flexiplace (offered 2 days a week) in addition to the flexible hours. They also appreciate the other benefits of federal employment, including annual and sick leave, health insurance, etc. Our employees are also looking for career advancement and our continuing challenge is to assist them in their development so that they can lead the organization in the future.